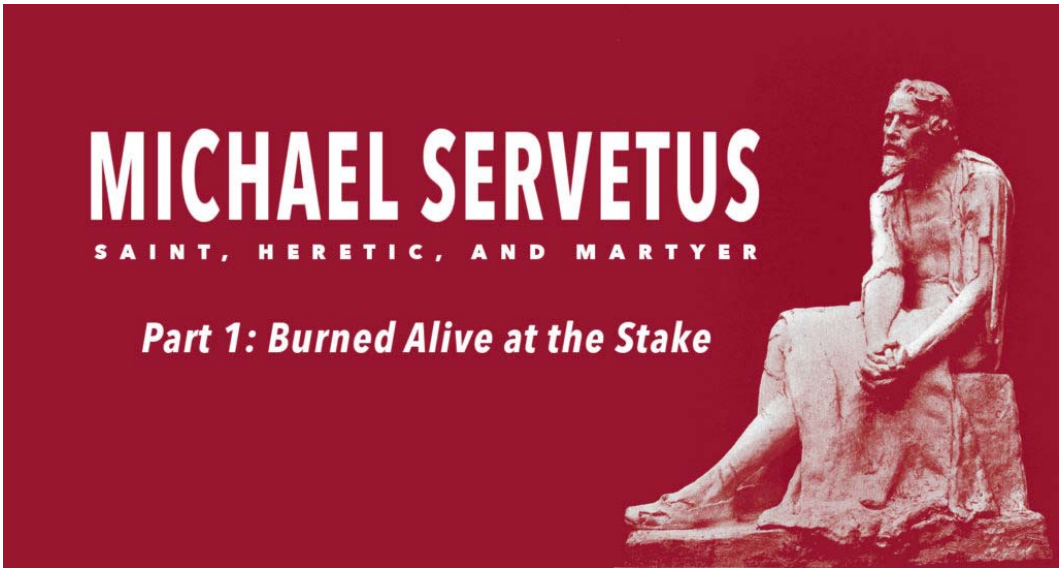

Michael Servetus: Saint, Heretic, and Martyr (Part 1: Burned Alive at the Stake)

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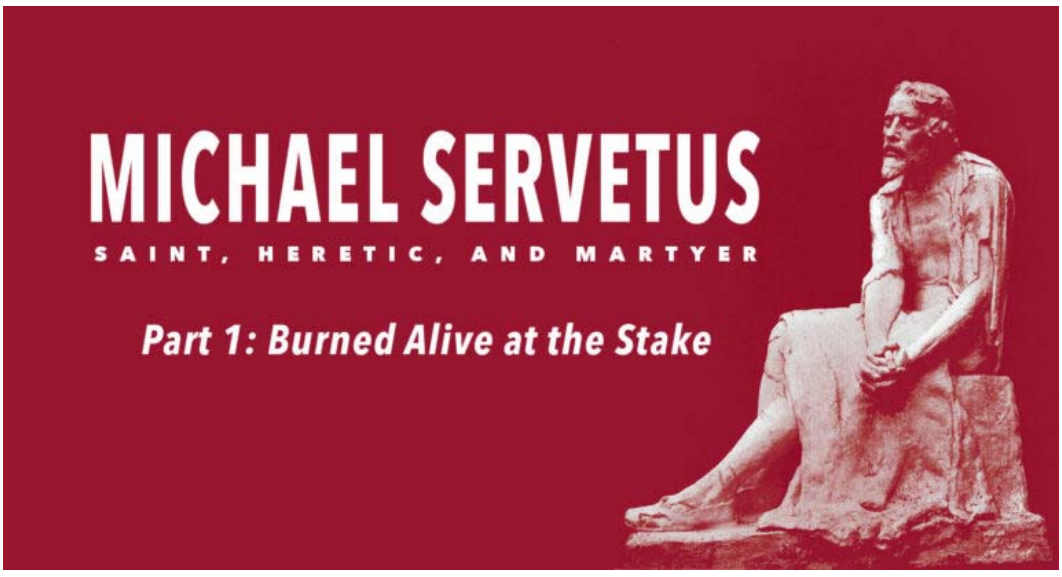

Bruce Gordon, in his *Calvin* biography wrote "For many, the execution of Michael Servetus in Geneva has defined John Calvin's posthumous reputation." [1] In this series, I will discuss the execution of Michael Servetus, beginning with a description of Michael Servetus' execution by the Geneva Council in gates of Geneva on plain of Champel, where he was burned alive on October 27th, 1553.

The Execution of Michael Servetus

"The Genevan council's decision was unanimous to condemn Servetus—he was to die." [2] John Calvin heartlessly described how Michael Servetus reacted to the verdict that he was to be burned at the stake: "he moaned like a madman and had no more composure than a demoniac. At length his cries so increased that he continuously beat his breast and bellowed in Spanish: mercy! mercy!" [3] (*la misericordia! la misericordia!*) "It was his [Servetus'] teachings on the Trinity and infant baptism that were stated as his pernicious errors." [4] In consequence, Michael Servetus was to be baptized by fire.

John Calvin accompanied the prosecution against Michael Servetus but Calvin's confidant "[William] Farel accompanied Servetus to the place of execution, attempting to the last to gain a confession that Christ was the true Son of God." [5]. John Calvin had presented the 39 allegations against Servetus during the trial, but John Calvin was not

present during the execution. [6] Calvin concluded that for Servetus: "This was the end. 'So following the rule of Paul,' Calvin added, 'I withdrew from the heretic who is self-condemned." [7] Ronald Wallace said Calvin did not attend the execution because he did not want Servetus to be burned alive, and Emmanuel Stickelberger reports that Calvin "spent the hour on his knees" during the execution. It was William Farel, not John Calvin, who escorted Michael Servetus to the place of execution as "Servetus walked in silence. Straw and leaves sprinkled with sulphur were placed upon his head and he was chained to the stake. His arms tied behind his back, he had the fire shown to him before it was tossed on the wood." [8]

Ronald Wallace, a Calvin scholar reports in his book *Calvin, Geneva and the Reformation* that "The executioner was inexpert and the onlookers, appalled by the long drawn-out shrieks of the victim, out of pity tried to help the fire to burn more quickly by throwing faggots in to him to hurry up the process of death. The only devices in the whole affair that worked efficiently were the chain which kept the body tightly fixed and a thick cord wound several times around his neck." [9] What is it like to be burned to death? I decided not to describe it, after learning about it myself. Bruce Gordon said that Servetus called out to Jesus for mercy (*la misericordia! la misericordia!*), a call that Calvin and Genevan Council ignored. Gordon said Servetus "shrieked in horror. His last words were 'O

Jesus, Son of the Eternal God, have pity on me!'—crucially, not 'eternal Son of God.' In half an hour, he was dead at the age of forty-four." [10] Bernard Cottret in his *Calvin: A Biography* said "Servetus died, burned alive, on the plain of Champel at the gate of Geneva. He passed away after committing a terrible error of syntax; he cried out, "Oh Jesus, son of eternal God, have pity on me! in place of the proper, "Oh Jesus, eternal son of God." [11]. Cottret concludes with this power final remark: "His [Michael Servetus'] punishment was due to the misplacing of a single adjective. Heresy is never anything but a question of grammar." [12]

Michael Servetus (1511—1553)

In part two of this series, I will discuss the implications of the execution of Michael Servetus.

Series:

Sources

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9. Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin, Geneva and the Reformation: A Study of Calvin as Social Reformer, Churchman, Pastor and Theologian*, Wipf & Stock Publishers: 1998, Eugene. Print. p. 73.

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11. Bernard Cottret, *Calvin: A Biography,* T & T Clark: 2000, Grand Rapids. Print. p. 225.

12. Ibid.

13. Header contains Image: "Michael Servetus in prison, by Clotilde Roch. Monument in Annemasse, France" (source: wikipedia)

14. Image: John Hus at the stake, Jena codex c. 1500 (source: wikipedia)

15. Image: Sixteenth-century portrait of John Calvin by an unknown artist. From the collection of the Bibliothèque de Genève (Library of Geneva) (source: wikipedia)

16. Image: Portrait of Michael Servetus "*Miguel Servet*, *Miguel de Villanueva* (1511 - 1553)" (source: wikipedia)

Related: Bernard Cottret, Bruce Gordon, Burning at the Stake, Emmanuel Stickelberger, Execution, Geneva, Guillaume Farel, John Calvin, Michael Servetus, Ronald Wallace, Servetus, ServetusSeries, William Farel

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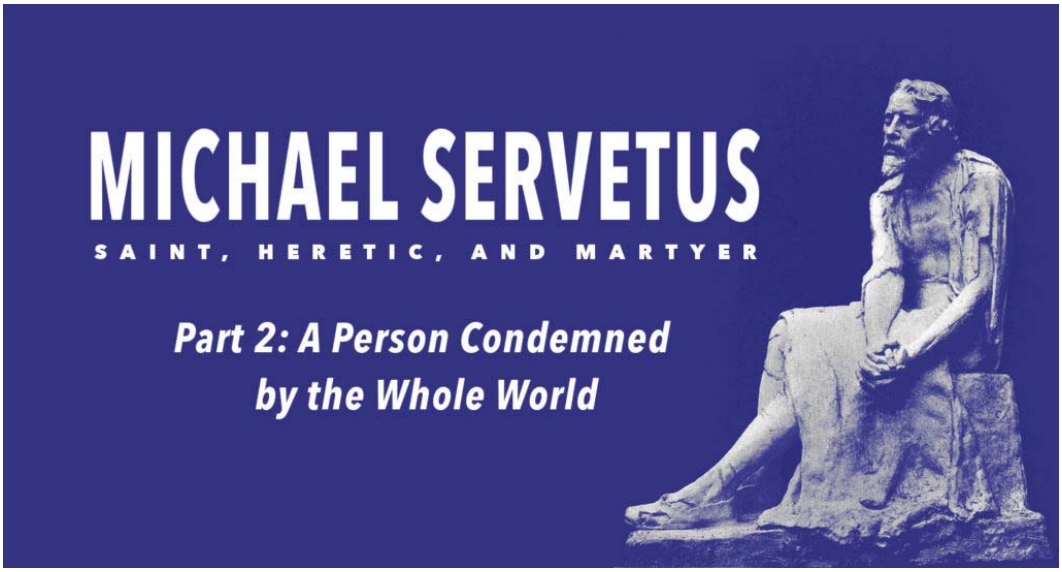

Michael Servetus: Saint, Heretic, and Martyr (Part 2: A Person Condemned by the Whole World)

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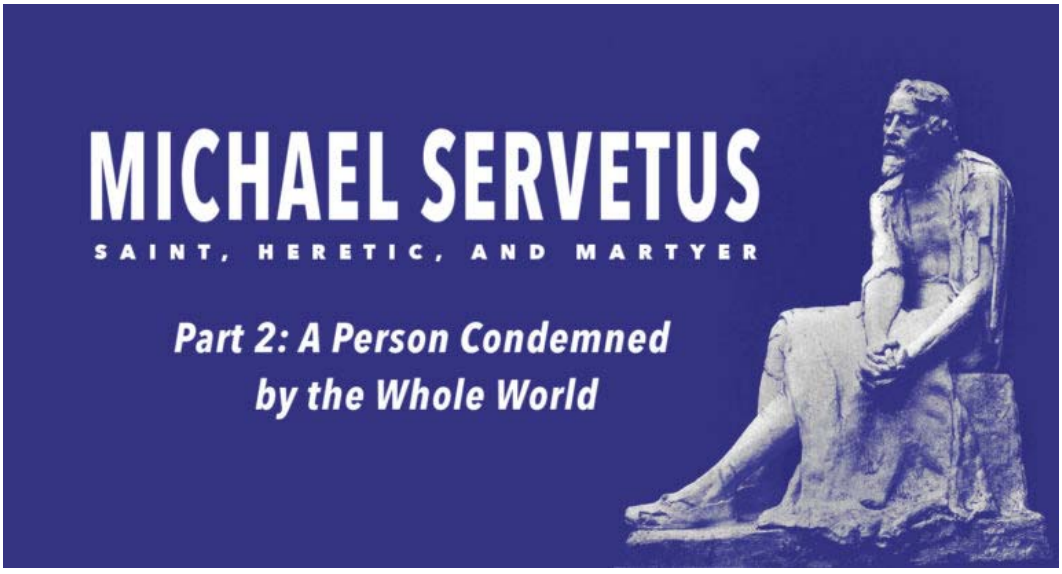

In Part 1: Burned Alive at the Stake of this *Michael Servetus: Saint, Heretic, and Martyr* series, I described the horrific execution of Michael Servetus. In Part 2, I will explain that John Calvin is guilty for the death of Michael Servetus, but this guilt is shared by the Geneva Council, the Protestant Church, the Catholic Church, and the whole world of the 16th century.

Michael Servetus versus the World

"For many, the execution of Michael Servetus in Geneva has defined John Calvin's posthumous reputation." [1] John Calvin is to be blamed for Michael Servetus' execution (as I will discuss later) but it is a mistake to blame Calvin alone. "After the execution Calvin sought, and received such universal approval from all over the world for what had been done in Geneva, even to the burning (of which he himself disapproved) that it was obvious that the world of his day felt it could not allow such a radical fanatic the least opportunity to conduct a militant crusade for his views." [2] At the time, everyone of note who was consulted approved of the deed. "Servetus suffered the fate that hundreds of heretics and Anabaptists suffered at the hands of Protestant authorities of all shades of opinions, as well as Catholic authorities" [3]. Servetus was well known and was detested in many places besides Geneva." [4] Servetus had provoked Calvin but he had also provoked the whole world, and the whole world had colluded against him—Protestant and Catholic alike.

John Calvin's Guilt

John Calvin is responsible for Servetus death, and Henry Beveridge explains why Calvin is guilty for the death of Servetus in a famous footnote of his translation of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion:*

"He [John Calvin] asked the councils of Geneva to arrest the heretic Michael Servetus, brought charges

against him, carried on the debate to prove that his heresy was threatening the Church of Christ, and approved of the verdict to put him to death (although he urged beheading instead of burning at the stake). Calvin even wrote a small book defending the death sentence upon Servetus." [5]

It is very unlikely that Servetus would have died without Calvin, but Calvin did not act alone, nor upon his authority alone. Calvin shared the same conviction as the whole world, that it was necessary to put heretics to death who injured the church, state or anyone therein. François Wendel explains in his book *Calvin: Origins and Development of His Religious Thought* that:

"Calvin was convinced, and all the reformers shared this conviction, that it was the duty of a Christian magistrate to put to death blasphemers who kill the soul, just as they punish murderers who kill the body." [6]

Servetus died, in large part due to Calvin's belief that the church and state must be protected from heretics, and Calvin did everything within his power and under legal due process to oppose a notorious heretic. Calvin was a magisterial reformer, and before Servetus was executed, Calvin wrote in his institutes that it was not the role of the church to use the sword against heretics, but the world at that time approved of putting heretics and Anabaptists to death frequently.

In a later installment of this series, I'll discuss how Calvin departed from his earlier theology (such as his 1543 Latin edition of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*) that limited the punishment of heretics to excommunication alone, and discuss how Calvin in the post-Servetus period argued that the magistrate (or state) had the divine right to punish heretics, even to the point of executing them.

John Calvin is guilty of an error of his age, and for not following his own theology, when he advocated for the wrongful death of Michael Servetus in 1553.

Geneva's Guilt

Reformation Wall in Geneva: Farel, Calvin, Beza, and Knox

It is difficult to imagine the execution of Servetus happening in the same way without John Calvin, however Servetus had already escaped execution once before, and had received condemning statements from many theologians besides John Calvin. So it is likely that Michael Servetus would have ended up executed as a heretic somewhere somehow.

It's important to state again that Servetus was arrested, tried, condemned and executed by the Genevan Council—not John Calvin individually or upon Calvin's order or authority alone. Servetus had quarreled with Calvin for decades before he arrived in Geneva, and had been condemned by other reformers, and had escaped execution early in that same year of 1553 by the Catholic Church and French authorities. So Servetus' reputation as a "notorious heretic" preceded him to Geneva.

Theodore Beza reports in his biography of Calvin that "upon his arrival in Geneva, Servetus was recognized by several who had come across him elsewhere" [7] and others including **William Farel** (a.k.a. Guillaume Farel) participated in the prosecution of Servetus too, Calvin did not act alone. No doubt, Servetus was arrested, tried and executed due to his decades of arguing with Calvin leading up to his arrival in Geneva, but Servetus was reckless in advocating his anti-Chalcedonian and anti-Nicene theology, and that made the world a dangerous place for Servetus no matter where he went.

An important fact, that demonstrates that the Geneva Council acted on its own volition and was not Calvin's puppet is demonstrated by the Genevan Council's choice to use a more severe and inhumane form of execution than Calvin desired; this shows that Calvin did not authoritatively orchestrate the events of the execution, even though he made significant contributions that caused them to happen. Arguably all the citizens of Geneva demanded the death of Servetus for his crimes of heresy.

It was the Genevan Council that executed Michael Servetus, and although John Calvin advocated for this action, it was the Genevan Council who was most guilty for Servetus' death.

Theodore Beza (1519-1605)

William Farel (1489–1565)

JOHN CALVIN (1509–1564)

Heinrich Bullinger (1504-1575)

Philip Melanchthon (1497-1560)

Martin Bucer (1491-1551)

The Protestant Church's Guilt

All the leading protestant representatives outside of Geneva approved of the execution of Servetus too. Before condemning Servetus, the

Genevan Council sent letters to the other Swiss city-states for a second opinion on Servetus (demonstrating further that Servetus was not put to death based upon Calvin's opinions alone) and they all praised the Genevan Council's death sentence for Servetus: "Zurich, Bern, Basel, and Schaffhausen were asked to pronounce on it. . . . there seems to have been a unanimous judgment against Servetus, with some rare exceptions" [8]. Calvin also sent many letters to justify his involvement in the execution of Servetus, and the responses he received also demonstrate that the Genevan Council was the most responsible for Servetus' death as well. I will share some example responses from famous theologians outside of Geneva (or who came to Geneva later), that show that the execution of Servetus was approved by the entire Protestant Church at that time.

Heinrich Bullinger, the famous Swiss Reformer and successor of Ulrich Zwingli in Zurich approved of the execution of Michael Servetus and wrote to Calvin: "God has given you an opportunity to wash us all clean from the suspicion of being heretics or favoring heresy if you show yourselves vigilant and ready to prevent this poison from spreading further" [9] and Cottret said that "Bullinger condemned Servetus as a demon from hell and wrote to Calvin that the Genevan church had been given a glorious opportunity to strike against heresy."

Notably, Martin Luther's famous successor and Lutheran leader "**Philip Melanchthon** wrote to Calvin, 'I have read your answer to the blasphemies of Servetus and approve of your piety and opinions. I judged also that the Genevan Senate acted correctly to put an end to this obstinate man, who could never cease blaspheming." [10]

Theodore Beza, Calvin's successor in Geneva (who came to Geneva after Servetus was executed), viewed Servetus as a sub-human monster and said "This Spaniard [Servetus] of cursed memory was not so much a man as a monstrous embodiment of all the heresies, old as well as new . . . he was condemned on 27 October to be burnt at the stake as the righteous judgment of God and men on his crimes." [11] The entire Protestant world applauded the Genevan Council's

decision to burn Servetus at the stake for failing their arcane religious tests.

John Calvin was not the first to condemn Michael Servetus. Servetus had received condemnations for his theologians long before he was executed. Servetus had clashed with famous theologians and churches arguably before he first encountered Calvin. As early as the 1530's, **Martin Bucer** and **Johannes Oecolampadius** encountered Servetus and made similar condemnations of Servetus: "Oecolampadius, who at last took offense at this ideas [i.e. Servetus' theology] . . . Oecolampadius summoned Servetus, if he still wanted to be considered a Christian, to recognize Jesus as the Son of God, consubstantial with the Father." [12] And, "Bucer publicly refuted this work, and it was banned, in Strasbourg as well as in Basel." Bucer said Servetus "was worthy of having his entrails torn out" [13] and this was not an idle threat.

The Catholic Church's Guilt

The entire Protestant church applauded the execution of Michael Servetus, and the Catholic Church applauded it as well—the whole world opposed Servetus, the "notorious heretic." Not long before Servetus was executed in Geneva in 1553, the Catholic Church had imprisoned him in Vienne after John Calvin had given the French authorities a tip about the "notorious heretic in their midst" [14] but Servetus managed to "escape over the rooftops on April 7. He was condemned in absentia on June 17. The sentence was executed by burning him in effigy along with five bales of blank paper, used to represent his works" [15] in Paris.

Bernard Cottret suggests that John Calvin and the Genevan Church used Servetus as a pawn, in a move to regain "entrance into the communion of the saints" [16] by aiding and abetting the Roman Catholic Church's arrest of Michael Servetus. Calvin and the Genevans may have taken advantage of Servetus to secure an alliance or truce with the Roman Catholic Church, and neither the Geneva Church or the Catholic Church had any real care or concern for Servetus. Cottret

summarizes frankly that they believed that "A good heretic is a dead heretic. Calvin's conduct can also be explained, more prosaically, by his fear of a popish plot aimed at destabilizing his position in Geneva . . . Servetus was treated by both sides as a . . . double agent that neither camp recognized as . . . their own." [17] Cottret summarizes Calvin's argument in a syllogism based on a lost letter: "Socrates is a man, and therefore mortal; Servetus is a heretic, and therefore combustible." [18] Cottret also cites a "terrible sentence" [19] from a lost letter from John Calvin on Servetus that says: "One should not be content with simply killing such people, but should burn them cruelly." [20]

Michael Servetus was condemned by the Whole World

The sixteenth century post-Reformation period was not a time of religious freedom or free speech. It was an era when the fledgling Protestant church fought for survival, and this resulted in wars between churches and states grounded in religious differences. Churches regularly anathematized each other. A person with "orthodox" beliefs in one church or state, was considered "heterodox" in other churches or states, and moving from place to place was a life endangering maneuver. Servetus was a martyr because he died for having different theological beliefs, and asking questions that were forbidden. Servetus died as a martyr for Christians who were wrongly executed for not conforming to the theological hegemony of the church and state in the place where they lived. The whole world condemned Servetus, and therefore he must be remembered as a martyr, so that we remember not to execute those who believe differently than us.

In Part 3 I will discuss the origin of Michael Servetus' radical theology.

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1. Bruce Gordon, *Calvin*, Yale University Press: 2009, Great Britton, Print. p. 217

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21. Header contains Image: "Michael Servetus in prison, by Clotilde Roch. Monument in Annemasse, France" (source: wikipedia)

22. Image of Martin Bucer (source: wikipedia)

23. Image of Theodore Beza (source: wikipedia)

24. Image of Philip Melanchton (source: wikipedia)

25. Image of John Calvin (source: wikipedia)

26. Image of Henry Bullinger (source: wikipedia).

27. Image of William Farel (Guillaume Farel) (source: wikipedia).

Related: Bernard Cottret, Bruce Gordon, Catholic Church, Geneva, Geneva Council, Guillaume Farel, Heinrich Bullinger, John Calvin, Martin Bucer, Martin Luther, Michael Servetus, Philip Melanchthon, Servetus, ServetusSeries, Theodore Beza, William Farel

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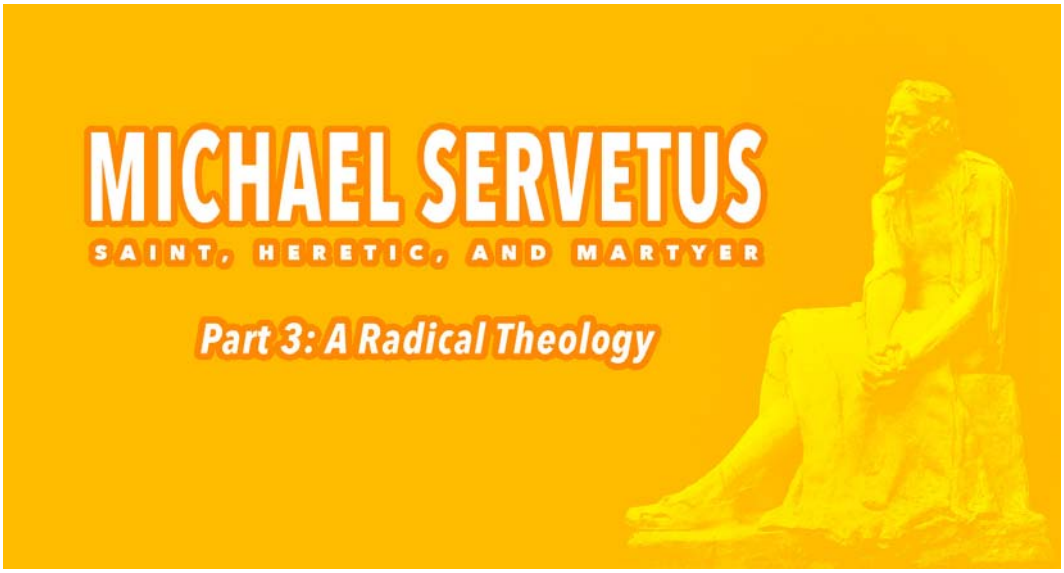

Michael Servetus: Saint, Heretic and Martyr (Part 3: A Radical Theology)

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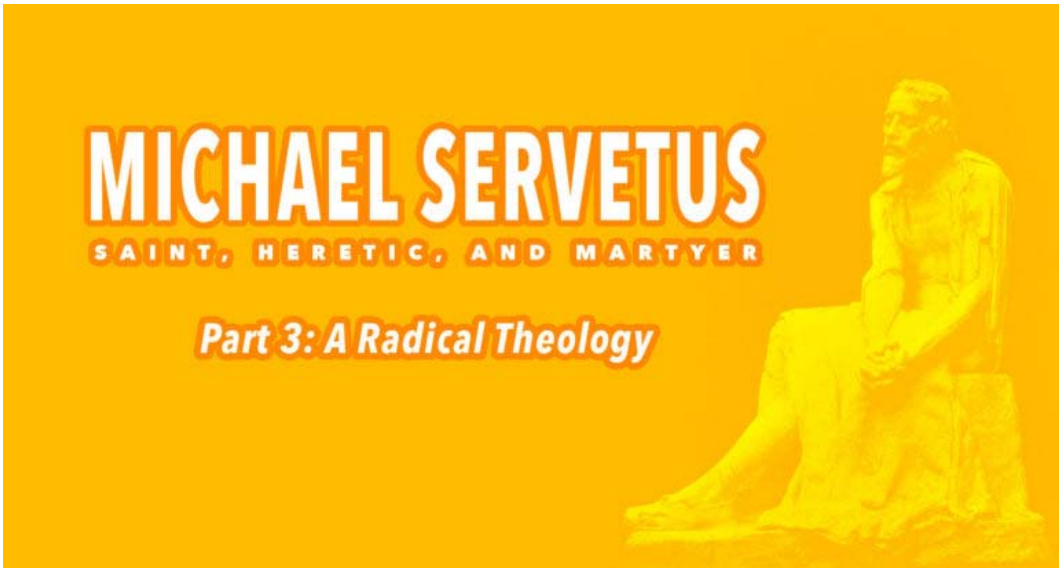

ichael Servetus' Radical Theology

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Michael Servetus was a Spaniard "born about 1511 in Villanueva [de Sigena], 160 miles upriver from Zaragoza, Servetus was [John] Calvin's close contemporary" [1]

Servetus' radical theology did not originate from an abnormally carnal nature. Servetus had an impeccably moral character, and perhaps it was Servetus' saintly ethic that drove his passion for theology, and also drove his opponents to hate him even more so. Bernard Cottret provides this moving report of Servetus' saintly life that is illuminates Servetus' internal drive:

"Far from being a happy bachelor—are bachelors ever happy?—he led an irreproachable life, an accident in his youth having freed him finally from those urgings of the flesh that men are subject to. Not the least lewdness, no fornication, no double life, no mistresses in his closet, Servetus offered nothing, absolutely nothing, for his opponents to lay hold of -- he was

totally irreproachable. In the midst of so many Christians who believed or thought they believed, his faith was indisputable, his motives were pure; he was, in short, a holy man who was mistaken in his beliefs. A heretic irritates all the more if he is virtuous." [2]

Bernard Cottret argues that Servetus' radical theology may have originated from the prevalence of all three Abrahamic religions in the place where he lived in Spain, and his desire to have a unified faith with them all. "In Servetus the three great monotheistic religions that had colonized the Iberian Peninsula, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, coexisted." [3] Cottret speculates "Was Servetus a Jew? He always denied it. But the evidence suggests that he possessed a knowledge of Judaism that surpassed that of the best Christian scholars." [4] Like the Ebionites, Nazarenes and other Judaizers, Servetus developed a Christian theology that was closer to Judaism, and he was willing to abandon any theology that was incompatible with Judaism. "For Servetus 'one basis of determining the validity of a Christian view was whether or not Jewish sources would have accepted that point of dogma.'" [5] Servetus was even willing to criticize the Nicene and Chalcedon creeds where were the universal standard for orthodoxy. Cottret says that "One God in three persons? This belief was unnecessary, according to Servetus, who deplored the fact that this doctrine divided Christianity from the other monotheisms, Judaism and Islam." [6]

On the Errors of the Trinity (1531)

Michael Servetus wrote many books, but it was his theological writings that resulted in his universal condemnation and ultimately his execution. Two books are particularly notable, the first is Servetus' *De Trinitatis erroribus libri septem* (*On the Errors of the Trinity: seven books*) published in 1531, which was received with severe criticism. The book is frequently labeled as 'antitrinitarian' and Servetus is frequently said to reject the Trinity, but I doubt many Christians would be able to identify Servetus' specific errors in this book. Even the english translations of the Latin book's title is misleading, suggesting a radical antitrinitarinism that departs from orthodox *in toto*. For instance, Bernard Cottret provides two sample quotations from Servetus' *On the Errors of the Trinity* (or *Concerning Trinitarian Errors*):

"I do not separate Christ from God any more than a voice from the speaker or a ray from the sun. . . . He and the Father are one as the ray and the sun are one light." [7] - Michael Servetus

"Christ walketh upon the wings of the wind and sitteth upon the circle of the earth. He measureth the heavens with a span and the waters of the sea in his hand." [8] - Michael Servetus

Dialogues on the Trinity (1532)

Not long after *On the Errors of the Trinity* was published Johannes Oecolampadius compelled Servetus to recant his errors, and Martin Bucer publicly refuted Servetus' work too (likely upon Oecolampadius's request). Prior to publishing it, Servetus had lived in with Johannes Oecolampadius for about ten months. A year later in 1532, Servetus was compelled to retract *On the Errors of the Trinity*, and he did so through another publication *Dialogorum de trinitate libri duo* (*Dialogues on the Trinity: two books*); some scholars describe this new book as a compulsory retraction of his previous immature work (*On the Errors of the Trinity*) but others scholars describe it as an attempt to address criticism of his original book. I do not have access to english translations of either works to make a judgment. Regardless, the result of Servetus two books on the Trinity may be understood as one work in two parts. Servetus was publicly opposed and confronted by the famous reformers of the 1530's, and now the Holy Inquisition was aware of his radical theology, and so Servetus could not return to Spain. Servetus decided to go on the run and remain undercover.

In 1533, Michael Servetus disguised himself with the pseudonym "Michel de Villeneuve" [9] and fled to study medicine, mathematics and other subjects at a university in Paris. Servetus was a genius who mastered many subjects in addition to theology and wrote many books. "Besides medicine and the pharmacopoeia, Servetus also cultivated geography and astrology. Insatiably curious about everything, he studied the origin of syphilis, the digestion of food, and the pulmonary circulation of the blood." [10] Many today credit Servetus for his remarkable discovery of Pulmonary circulation that pre-dated William Harvey (1578–1657). It is also at this time in Paris

that Servetus likely came in contact with John Calvin for the first time.

The Restoration of Christianity (1553)

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Michael Servetus' most important and influential work was his *Christianismi Restitutio* (*The Restoration of Christianity*); this second notable book was published in 1553, long after Servetus had completed writing it. The title *Restitutio* appears to be a parody of John Calvin's *Institutio*, indicating that *Restitutio* was a response to the first edition of John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536), and was in response to their correspondence via letters. Servetus provided a manuscript copy of his *The Restoration of Christianity* when they finally met face-to-face in 1546 (7 years before it was published). When Servetus finally managed to officially publish his *Restitutio* in 1553, it caused a cascade of events that lead to his execution.

The word *restoration* is the operative word in *The Restoration of Christianity*, because Servetus believed that "the 'restoration' of authentic Christianity, corrupted since the Council of Nicea in the fourth century, required a constant confrontation with the rabbinical sources that preceded the New Testament." [11] Servetus' radical theology, was a radical orthodoxy, and a radical return to pre-Constantinian Christianity, and it is not surprising that Servetus was

executed similar to the Anabaptists and others who criticized Constantinian Christianity.

Servetus' theology did not receive a fair assessment from leading Protestants and Catholics alike. Bernard Cottret provides a helpful summary of Servetus' *Restoration of Christianity* written in the personae of Servetus' critics: "The Trinity? It was a mere sophistry, invented by the Council of Nicea in 325. The two natures of the Savior, defined by the Council of Chalcedon in 451? Servetus accepted the formula, but when he explained it himself, his readers tore their hair." [12] And, "It was above all for his ideas about Christ that Servetus was reproached. This Spaniard was completely, abominably heretical; his obstinacy, his nimble mind, and his feelings for a retort never abandoned him. He had an answer for everything, and he bothered and disconcerted people." [13]

Bruce Gordon summarized *The Restoration of Christianity* this way:

"Among its offenses were a denial of original sin and a bizarre and hardly comprehensible view of the Trinity. Christ, for Servetus, was not the eternal Son of God but a form taken by God to come to earth. And that was only the beginning. Virtually everything he wrote would have offended Protestants and Catholics alike. Servetus believed that the devil created the papacy and that the end of the world would arrive when the Archangel Michael brought final deliverance, which the Spaniard held would be some time towards the end of the sixteenth century." [14]

Servetus was driven by an apocalyptic view of the world, and it caused him to act carelessly in his letters and publications, as well as in his personal encounters with the leading Protestant and Catholic authorities of his time, and his obsession drove him into conflicts in Spain and France that almost killed him multiple times before he was finally executed in Geneva.

In this Part 3 of the *Michael Servetus: Saint, Heretic, and Martyr* series, I described the origin of Michael Servetus' radical theology. In Part 2, I described Michael Servetus as "A Person Condemned by the Whole World" and in Part 1, I described Michael Servetus' execution in Geneva where he was "Burned Alive at the Stake." Check back soon for Part 4!

Series:

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15. Header contains Image: "Michael Servetus in prison, by Clotilde Roch. Monument in Annemasse, France" (source: wikipedia)

16. Image. Statue of Michael Servetus near Geneva in the place de la Mairie d'Annemasse: (source: wikipedia).

17. Image. Silver medal servetus: (source: calvin.edu).

18. Image. Errors of the Trinity image: (source: galileo exhibit)

19. Image. Restoration of Christianity: (source: wikipedia)

Related: Bernard Cottret, Bruce Gordon, Christianismi Restitutio, De Trinitatis erroribus, Dialogorum de trinitate, Dialogues on the Trinity, Johannes Oecolampadius, John Calvin, Martin Bucer, Michael Servetus, Nicene Creed, On The Errors of the Trinity, Pulmonary circulation, Restorationism, ServetusSeries, The Restoration of Christianity

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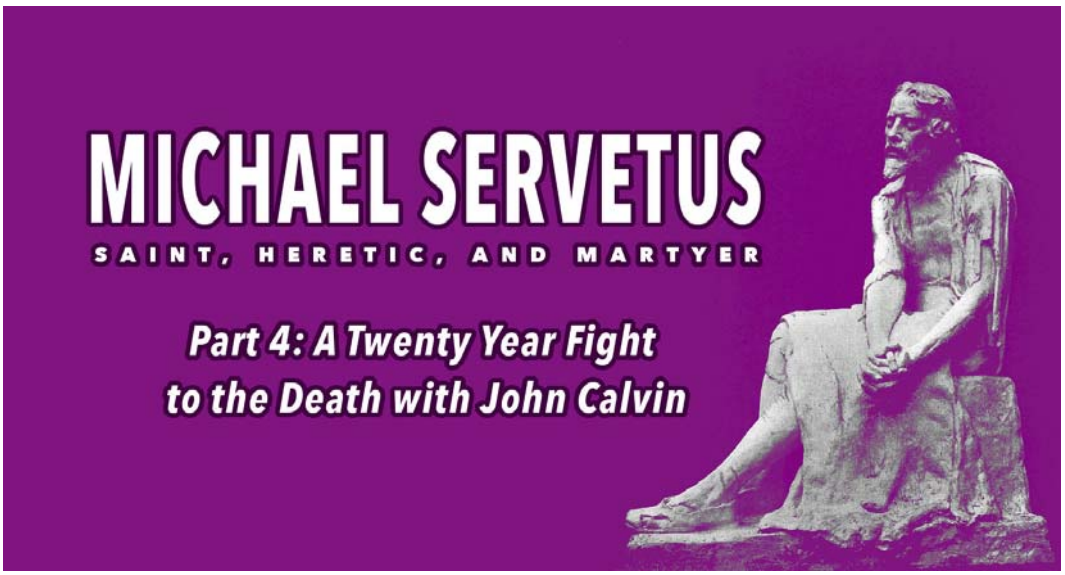

Michael Servetus: Saint, Heretic and Martyr (Part 4: A Twenty Year Fight to the Death with John Calvin)

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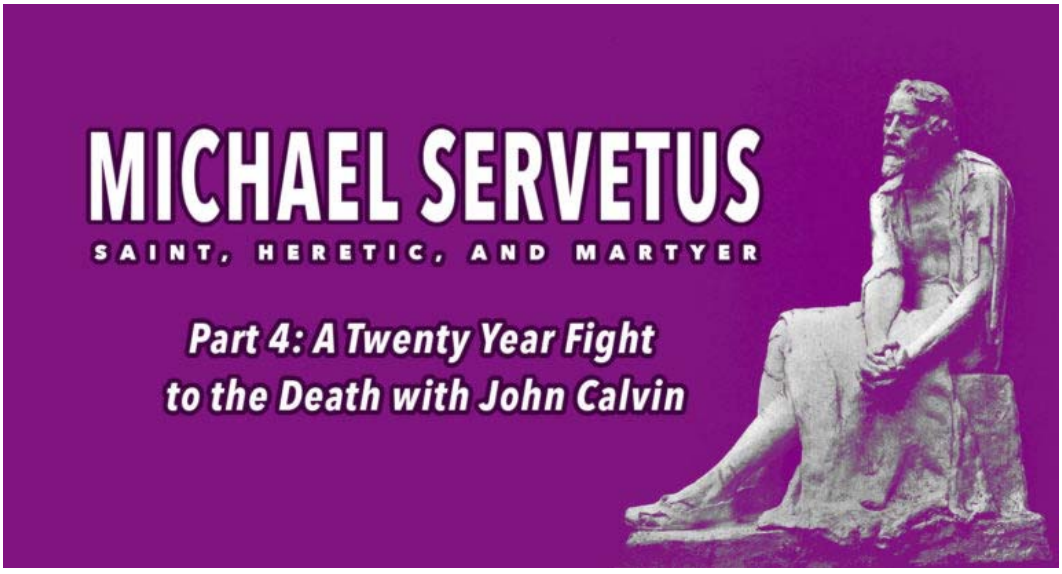

Calvin vs Servetus: a twenty year fight to the death

Michael Servetus (1511-1553) came in conflict with John Calvin (1509-1564) in the early 1530's and their correspondences spanned twenty years. "A strange mixture of fascination and repulsion haunted the relations between these two men. Many long years passed before the battle to the death began which ended in Servetus' burning." [1] At early times they exchanged letters using pseudonyms and at later times, they quarreled face-to-face. Servetus had many opponents, but John Calvin was a living effigy of everything Servetus fought against.

Round One: The fight begins

John Calvin and Michael Servetus became acquainted in the early 1530's in Paris, and they initially corresponded through pseudonyms. Servetus had fled to Paris after publishing his *On the Errors of the Trinity* (1531), and assumed the alias of "Michel de Villeneuve" [2] to mask his identify from the Holy Inquisition and his other critics of his radical theology of restoration. Calvin responded in kind with his own pseudonym of "Charles d'Espeville" [3] (or "Charles Despeville") but Calvin had different reasons for hiding, such as his recent break from Catholicism, embrace of the Reformation, and involvement in controversies in Paris at that time.

Theodore Beza reports that as early as 1534, "Calvin agreed to meet him [Servetus] in the hope of silencing him, or of convincing and reproving him from the Word of God. Calvin kept the appointment . . . but Servetus did not turn up." [4] Unfortunately, Servetus had been prevented from meeting Calvin in person at the last minute.

In 1536, John Calvin published the first edition of his magnum opus, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536)—a book that remains to be an icon of the Reformation—and Calvin's theological system became the best expression of Reformation orthodoxy. Consequently, Servetus viewed the person and works of Calvin as an

embodiment of everything he opposed and Servetus became obsessed with defeating his archnemesis. Calvin's motivation is more complicated, he published his first edition of the Institutes, and did not wish it to be challenged by any rival, even an amateur theologian like Servetus. Cottret said that "The struggle between Calvin and Servetus was an authentic defiance of the strong by the weak" [5] respectively.

John Calvin is indebted to Michael Servetus for inspiring Calvin's first theological publication, *Psychopannychia (1532)*, which was a refutation of the "Anabaptist" notion of "soul sleep" in the intermediate state between death and the resurrection. "Calvin's earliest theological work, the *Psychopannychia*, was at least in part directed against views attributed to Servetus and his circle in Paris." [6] Also, Calvin's first edition of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536), may have been inspired based upon his correspondences with Servetus. Calvin and Servetus had a symbiotic relationship, and dialectically speaking, or in the sense of iron sharpening iron. John Calvin may never have realize his [in]famous *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559) or radically influenced the future of the Reformed Church, Protestant Church, and the universal church today, unless he had quarreled with Servetus from the very beginning of his theological career.

Round Two: Calvin and Servetus face-to-face

Correspondence between Calvin and Servetus continued for twelve years after their first failed attempt to meet in 1534, and at last they did meet in 1546 in a famous encounter that Bernard Cottret described as follows:

"Immediately a rather silly authors' quarrel began, accompanied by a theological debate. With an assurance close to impudence, Servetus immediately

began giving Calvin lessons in christology and the baptism of the newly born. Calvin answered, but Servetus referred him to the manuscript of his Restitutio [The Restoration of Christianity]. Calvin, in turn, urged Servetus to read carefully and meditate on his own Institutio [The Institutes of the Christian Religion]. Servetus compiled and returned his copy of this work to Calvin, covered in the margin with his own critical annotations. Calvin could not permit the Institutes, the work of his life, to be debated. He preferred charitably, not to respond to this amateur theologian. Servetus persisted, but Calvin refused to continue corresponding with this bore, who sent him no less than thirty letters. Impassive, Calvin remained mute, and did not even design to return the Latin manuscript of the Restitutio to the Spaniard." [7]

After their face-to-face encounter, Cottret says "on Feb 13, 1547, Calvin allowed his anger to show in two letters, one to Jean Frellon, the other to Farel." [8] To William Farel (a.k.a. Guillaume Farel), John Calvin prophetically writes: "Servetus recently sent me with his letters a new volume of his ravings. . . . He would come here if I agreed. But I will not give him my word; for if he came, as far as my authority goes, I would not let him leave alive." [9] Calvin's statement is an *idle threat* made in confidence to a close friend, and is not a *plot*

to kill Servetus, similar to the common expression "I'm so angry, I could kill him!" Calvin wanted Servetus to recant, as Beza said.

Bernard Cottret reports the "Calvin bearded Servetus by refusing to return the manuscript of his book; Servetus persisted in provoking Calvin. He considered himself a David confronting the Genevan Goliath." [10] Calvin was aware that Servetus had not yet published his *Restitutio*, and likely retained the manuscript to silence this rival to his *Institutio*.

Round Three: Calvin strikes back

In 1550, John Calvin published *On Scandals,* which contained public repulsions of Michael Servetus. In *Calvin: A Biography*, Bernard Cottret provides a full page quote from *On Scandals (1550)* on Servetus. Here are a few sample quotes: Calvin writes "There is a certain Spaniard named Michael Servetus who pretends to be a doctor, calling himself Villeneuve. This poor braggart, already inflated with the arrogance of Portugal, but bursting even more with his own pride, thought he could acquire great fame . . . by overthrowing all the principles of Christianity [i.e. Calvin's *Institutes*]". [11] And, "In this book he [Servetus] wrote he shows himself such a mad dog, barking and biting, without sense or reason, that it can be clearly seen what spirit drives him . . . he is a man hungry for glory, who drinks in the dreams he can find to get drunk on." [12] And, Servetus "assembles I do not know what speculations so clumsy and unsupported that there is no one of sound understanding who would not judge that there has never been a man who drivelled like this unless he was bewitched by foolish self-love." [13]

Cottret also reports that Michael Servetus responded to John Calvin in similar harsh words: "Your Gospel is without God, without real faith, without good works. In place of God you have a Cerberus with three heads. For faith you have a fatalistic dream, and according to you good works are vain images." [14] (It may be worth remembering that in 16th century rhetoric, it was very common for opponents to call their opponents vulgar terms as such.)

Before 1550, John Calvin had opposed the punishment of heretics by the magistrate, and argued in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* that the most severe punishment for heretics was excommunication. Starting with *On Scandals* (1550) began to argue that the magistrate may use the sword against heretics who injure the church or the state. Bernard Cottret believed that Calvin had succumbed to political pressures in Geneva, and as a magisterial reformer, he turned to the magistrate in Geneva to overcome popish plots to persecute him. Cottret speculates that "'*The Restoration of Christianity*' gained influence and spread to Geneva to the chagrin of those loyal to John Calvin. The Calvinists believed that Servetus' heretical book was only always to be published because their Catholic enemies supported it" [15]

Round Four: Servetus raids Geneva

In 1553, Servetus finally published his *Christianismi Restitutio* (*The Restoration of Christianity*). Cottret suggests that even the title of Servetus' "*Restitutio"* [*Restoration of Christianity*] was a "criticism and antithesis" of Calvin's "*Institutio*" [*Institutes of the Christian Religion*]. The publication of Servetus' *Restitutio* at the beginning of 1553, resulted in his execution at the end of 1553. Bruce Gordon said "When Servetus published 'On the Restoration' in 1553, . . . John Calvin informed the authorities in Vienne, . . . that they had a notorious heretic in their midst. Servetus was arrested and tried, but managed to escape." [16] (Gordon reports that John Calvin worked with the Catholic Church and the French authorities to apprehend Servetus, and this appears to invalidate Cottret's speculation that Calvin feared that that the Catholic Church was supporting Servetus.) Bernard Cottret also reports that Servetus managed to escaped execution by the French authorities: "Servetus contrived to escape over the rooftops on April 7. He was condemned in absentia on June 17. The sentence was executed by burning him in effigy along with five bales of blank paper, used to represent his works." [17]

Servetus escaped his execution in the spring by the Catholics in France, only to be recaptured and executed in the fall by the

Protestants in Geneva. After Servetus escaped, he was on the run with no where to go. He could not return to France now. He could not go back to Spain because "as for the Holy Inquisition, it feverishly watched for the return of the prodigal son. Where could he go? All doors, closed, one after another." [18] Servetus said "such was the blindness of the world that I was sought for up and down to be led to my death. . . . With Jonah I longed rather to flee to the sea or to one of the new isles." [19] But, Servetus could not even flee across the Atlantic to the New World either, because "What America, however, would permit Servetus, the servant of Jesus, to find repose?" [20] The whole world desired the death of Michael Servetus, a man whom they considered to be a sub-human, monstrous heretic, and Servetus was prepared to defend his theology, even unto death.

Servetus had no were else he could go to escape—Servetus' works were already publicly refuted by Martin Bucer and banned in Basil and Strasbourg—so he could not seek refuge in the Swiss Protestant cities. So at last resort, Servetus decided to face his destiny and go to Geneva where he may confront John Calvin face-to-face, a man that he had challenged for decades, and who stood in effigy for the whole world that opposed him. "Servetus' repeated attempts to make contact with Calvin bordered on obsession. His arrival in Geneva was a provocation shaped by an apocalyptic view that in the final days as the Four Horsemen rode across Europe he would confront the man he held responsible for turning the Reformation into a new Rome. Servetus had arrived to make his final stand. In Geneva he would give a full account of his views, and die a martyr. There would be no more flight or hiding—it was a time to face his persecutors, and his most hated enemy." [21].

Final Round: Servetus is burned alive at the stake

I already described how the twenty year fight to death ends with Michael Servetus burned alive at the stake in the gates of Geneva in Part One of this series. In Part Five, I will write a defense of John Calvin.

Series:

Sources:

1. Bernard Cottret, *Calvin: A Biography,* T & T Clark: 2000, Grand Rapids. Print. p. 216.

2. Cottret. Ibid. p. 222.

3. Bruce Gordon, *Calvin*, Yale University Press: 2009, Great Britton, Print. p. 138

4. Theodore Beza, *The Life of Calvin: A Short Biography of John Calvin,* Print. p. 25

5. Cottret. Ibid. p. 25.

6. Gordon. Ibid. p. 217.

7. Cottret. Ibid. p. 217.

8. Cottret. Ibid. p. 216.

9. Cottret. Ibid. p. 217.

10. Cottret. Ibid. p. 218-9.

11. Cottret. Ibid. p. 219.

12. Cottret. Ibid. p. 219.

13. Cottret. Ibid. p. 219.

14. Cottret. Ibid. p. 220.

15. Cottret. Ibid. p. 220.

16. Gordon. Ibid. p. 218.

17. Cottret. Ibid. p. 223.

18. Cottret. Ibid. p. 215.

19. Cottret. Ibid. p. 215.

20. Cottret. Ibid. p. 215.

21. Gordon. Ibid. p. 219.

22. Header contains Image: "Michael Servetus in prison, by Clotilde Roch. Monument in Annemasse, France" (source: wikipedia)

Related: Bernard Cottret, Bruce Gordon, Charles Despeville, Christianismi Restitutio, Concerning Scandals, Guillaume Farel, institutes of the christian religion, Institutio Christianae Religionis, John Calvin, Michael Servetus, Michel de Villeneuve, On Scandals, Restitutio, ServetusSeries, The Restoration of Christianity, Theodore Beza, William Farel

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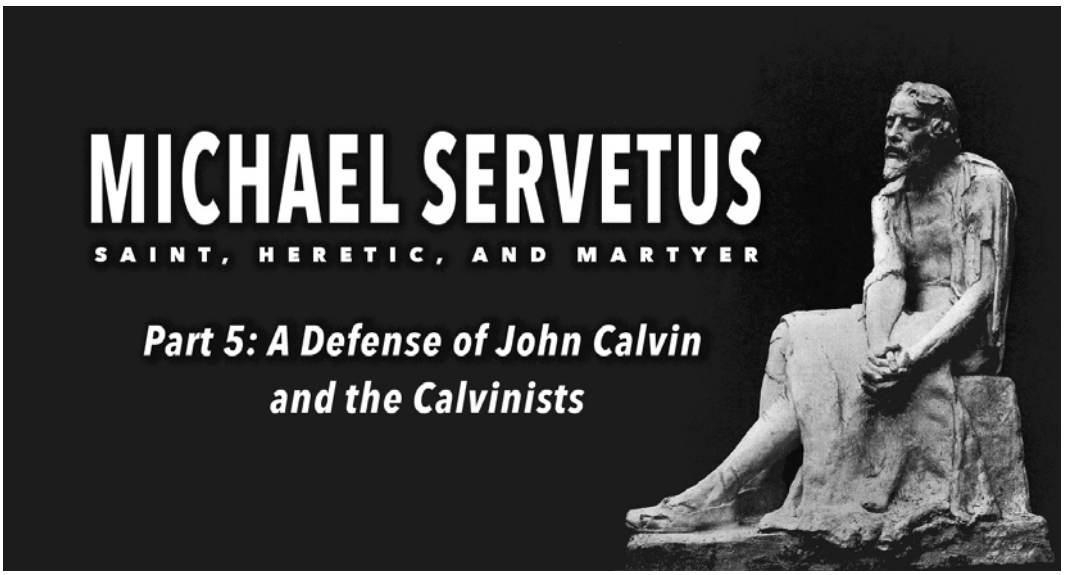

Michael Servetus: Saint, Heretic and Martyr (Part 5: A Defense of John Calvin and the Calvinists)

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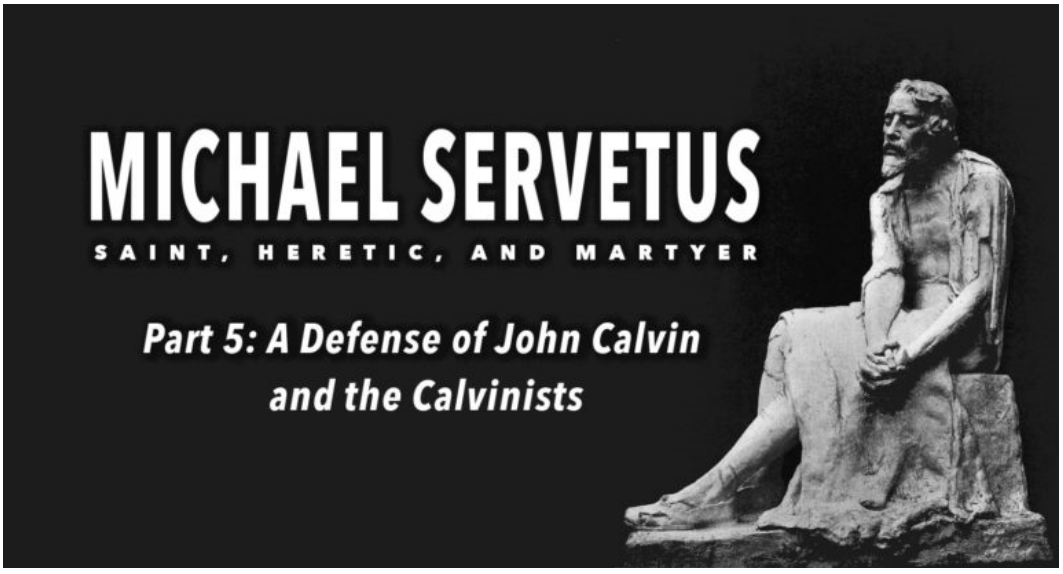

In defense of Calvinists: A memorial to Michael Servetus

John Calvin has wayward sons who still defend the execution of Servetus and Calvin's participation in it, however most Calvinists today admit that Calvin erred in the Servetus affair, and some Calvinists today are willing to admit that Calvin sinned and that Calvinism bears this burden. The exemplary response to Servetus' wrongful death was enacted by Genevan Calvinists who setup a memorial to Michael Servetus on October 27th, 1903 in the gates of Champel in Geneva, which was intentionally on the 350th anniversary to the day of Servetus' execution in the very same place Servetus was burned alive at the stake.

In Henry Beveridge's translation of the *Institutes of Christian Religion* IV.20.16 there is a footnote that described this memorial event: "today there is a monument on Champel, the hill upon which Servetus perished in the flames. It was erected on the 350th anniversary of the execution, by followers of Calvin." [1] The Calvin scholar, Ronald Wallace provides a description and translation of this monument to Servetus: "In 1903 a committee from the Reformed Churches set up a granite monument to Servetus at the place of his death and inscribed: '*Respectful and grateful sons of Calvin, our great Reformer, but condemning an error which belonged to his century and firm believers in freedom of conscience according to the true principles of the Reformation and the Gospel, we have raised this expiatory monument.*'" [2].

The Servetus monument and its engraved inscription provide a model response for Calvinists to follow today, because the Genevan Calvinists identify themselves as heirs and admirers of Calvin life and work, yet these Calvinists also admit that Calvin gravely erred in participating in the capital punishment of Servetus, and they recognize a shared guilt in the actions committed by John Calvin. The Genevan Calvinists provide a model response that Calvinists today may admire and imitate. The Servetus monument is also a tangible reminder, that true Calvinists, do not absolve Calvin of all guilt in Servetus' wrongful death, or shamefully defend the death of Servetus or any heretic today. Every time I hear a so-called Calvinist today make a horrific defense of the burning of Michael Servetus or any heretic, I remember the *Monument on Champel* and the contrite Geneva Calvinists who raised this memorial in 1903, and believe these *so-called* Calvinists today betray John Calvin's life and work, and bring shame and disgrace upon Calvinism and Calvinists everywhere.

In defense of Calvinism: The Institutes opposed executing heretics

John Calvin's theology is a judgment upon Calvin's actions in the execution of Servetus, because Calvin's own theology prohibited the execution of heretics. In the 1543 Latin edition of John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*—the same edition he gave to Michael Servetus when they met face-to-face in 1546—Calvin teaches that the severest punishment that should be executed upon a heretic is excommunication and that the sword (especially in capital punishment) should not be used against heretics so that the church does not become a laughing stock. Calvin sadly fulfilled his own prophecy by participating in the execution of Servetus and this has left a black-mark upon Calvin and Calvinism to this day. Bruce Gordon

famously said that "for many, the execution of Michael Servetus in Geneva has defined John Calvin's posthumous reputation." [3]

In defense of Calvinism, which may be defined as the theological system expounded in John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (and not the T.U.L.I.P.), it explicitly teaches that heretics must not suffer capital punishment, and the most severe punishment Calvinism allows for heresy is excommunication. So John Calvin deviated from his own Calvinism when he participated in the execution of Michael Servetus! Henry Beveridge writes in a footnote of the *Institutes* IV.20.16: "It is truly unfortunate that these sound sentiments were not heeded by Calvin himself, when, exactly six years before this definitive edition of 1559 was published, he asked the councils of Geneva to arrest the heretic Michael Servetus." [4]

Ford Lewis Battles translates this section of the Institutes IV.20.16 as follows (I've added bold for emphasis):

First, this is the aim of ecclesiastical jurisdiction: that offenses be resisted, and any scandal that has arisen be wiped out. ***In its use two things ought to be taken into account: that this spiritual power be completely separated from the right of the sword; secondly, that it be administered not by the decision of one man but by a lawful assembly.*** *Both of these were observed when the church was purer [1 Cor 5:4-5].*

Now the holy bishops did not exercise their power through fines or prisons or other civil penalties but used the Lord's Word alone, as was fitting. For the severest punishment of

the church, the final thunderbolt, so to speak, is excommunication, which is used only in necessity. Now, this requires no physical force but is content with the power of God's Word. *In short, the jurisdiction of the ancient church was nothing but a declaration in practice (so to speak) of what Paul teaches concerning the spiritual power of pastors. "A power has been given us," he says, "to destroy strongholds, to level every pinnacle that vaunts itself against the knowledge of God, to subjugate and take captive every thought to the obedience of Christ, being ready to punish every disobedience." [1 Cor. 10:4-6 p.]* ***As this is done by the preaching of the doctrine of Christ, so, in order that this doctrine may not be a laughingstock,*** *those who profess themselves of the household of faith ought to be judged in accordance with what is taught. That cannot be done unless there be joined with the ministry the right to call those who are to be admonished privately or be more sharply corrected; also the right to bar from the communion of the Lord's Supper those who cannot be received without profaning this great mystery.*

(Institutes IV.xx.16) [5]

John Calvin deviated from his own theological system as his conflict with Michael Servetus escalated. After Calvin met Servetus face-to-face in 1546, he wrote a separate treaty *On Scandals* in 1550, that argued that the magistrate was justified in executing heretics that injured the reputation of the church or the state, and it included a full page condemnation of Servetus. Another deviation was in the definitive 1559 Latin edition of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (published six years after Servetus was executed) wherein Calvin adds this concluding comment that partially retracts his limitations on punishing heretics: "Therefore, while Paul says in another place that it is not ours to judge strangers [I Cor. 5:12], he subjects the children of the church to censures to chastise their vices, and he then implies that there were then judgments in force from which no one of the believers was immune." (Institutes IV.xx.16; 1559 ed.) Nevertheless, Calvinism as represented by the definitive 1559 Latin edition of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*'s reputation is injured by Calvin's actions against Servetus, but the Calvinism system may be invoked against Calvin to redeem it.

In Defense of John Calvin

In this series, I explained that John Calvin is culpable for the execution of Michael Servetus, a sin that the whole world of his time approved. Servetus was committed to a radical theology, and he directed it specifically against Calvin, and Calvin was forced to respond to an obstinate and persistent foe. Calvin wanted Servetus to recant, not to die, but when Calvin was faced by the perilous life-and-death situations of the early Reformation, he capitulated to a world that believed heretics should be executed, and Calvin modified his own theology to conform to this worldview of his age due to tremendous political pressures he faced in Geneva. Servetus was executed by the Genevan magistrate through due process of law and not by Calvin's sole command, but with Calvin's blessing and assistance as a key witness in prosecution of Servetus (as Beveridge described). After the verdict, Servetus received a more severe sentence than Calvin expected, and Calvin protested the Genevan

Council's sentencing Servetus to be burned alive at the stake, and requested a beheading instead, but he was overruled. Calvin could not bear to watch the inhumane execution of Servetus and spent that hour in prayer instead. Considering the whole story of John Calvin's twenty year fight to the death with Michael Servetus, I believe that we may condemn Calvin's involvement with Servetus, and still marvel at John Calvin's theological and ecclesiastical accomplishments like the Genevan Calvinists in 1903.

A Eulogy to Michael Servetus

This series' title *Michael Servetus: Saint, Heretic and Martyr* is based on the header "Saint Servetus, Heretic and Martyr (1553)" [6] from Bernard Cottret's *Calvin: A Biography*. Cottret says "What distinguishes a saint from a martyr in popular opinion? Did not determination to make Servetus a heretic contribute, on the contrary, to plaiting him a crown? The remembrance of Servetus persisted in Geneva in the years that followed his death at Champel." [7]

Series:

Sources:

1. Henry Beveridge, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1850. Institutes IV.20.16 footnote #587

2. Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin, Geneva and the Reformation: A Study of Calvin as Social Reformer, Churchman, Pastor and Theologian*, Wipf & Stock Publishers: 1998, Eugene. Print. p. 77.

3. Bruce Gordon, *Calvin*, Yale University Press: 2009, Great Britton, Print. p. 217

4. Beveridge. Ibid.

5. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Ed. John T. McNeill. Trans. Ford Lewis. Battles. Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1960. 1217. Print.

6. Bernard Cottret, *Calvin: A Biography,* T & T Clark: 2000, Grand Rapids. Print. p.213.

7. Cottret. Ibid. p. 225.

8. Image source for 1903 Monument on Champel (source: wikipedia). French inscription reads: "*fils respectueux et reconnaissants de calvin notre grand reformateur mais condamnant une erreur qui fut celle de son siecle et fermement attaches a la liberte de conscience selon les vrais principes de la reformation et de l'evangile nous avons eleve ce monument expiatoire lf xxvii octobre mcmiii*"

Related: Bernard Cottret, Bruce Gordon, calvinism, Calvinist, Champel, Ford Lewis Battles, Geneva, Henry Beveridge, institutes of the christian religion, John Calvin, Michael Servetus, Ronald Wallace, ServetusSeries

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